



The Netherlands

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to an overall environment of religious freedom and mutual tolerance. Latent tensions between Muslim and non-Muslim communities, however, were severely aggravated by the November 2004 killing of the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh--whose work had been criticized as anti-Islamic--by a Dutch-born member of a radical Islamic group. The killing triggered multiple instances of violence against Islamic institutions and mosques, reprisals against churches, and clashes between Muslim and other youth who identified themselves as "native Dutch." Even before the van Gogh killing, Dutch Muslims had increasingly been defending themselves against criticism for such perceived problems as the poor integration of Muslim immigrants into society, the high level of criminal activity among Muslim youth, and the conservative views of orthodox Muslims on women's rights and corporal punishment. There were fewer anti-Semitic incidents recorded in 2004 than in previous years, and many of these appeared to have been politically motivated in reaction to developments in the Middle East.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as a part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 16,485 square miles, and its population is approximately 16.3 million. Approximately 60 percent of the population has some religious affiliation, even though many do not practice their religion actively. Approximately 31 percent consider themselves Roman Catholic, 14 percent Dutch Reformed, 6 percent Muslim, 6 percent Calvinist Reformed, 3 percent non-Christian (Hindu, Jewish, or Buddhist), and 40 percent atheist or agnostic. Other Protestant denominations include Baptists, Lutherans, Anglicans, Protestants from the United States, and Remonstrants. Approximately 20 percent of citizens, primarily among those who have left the "traditional" churches, describe themselves as "seekers of spiritual or philosophical truths." These persons tend to gravitate toward (although not necessarily join) newer or nontraditional religious movements, such as Pentecostal groups, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hare Krishna, Transcendental Meditation, Scientology, Theosophy, or Anthroposophy.

Society has become increasingly secularized over the past several decades. According to the Government's Social Cultural Planning Bureau, religious membership has declined steadily from 76 percent in 1958 to 41 percent in 1995 and continues to decrease, although at a slower pace. Membership is decreasing among all religions except Islam. Approximately a quarter of church members are active within their religious communities. In 2002, an estimated 25 percent of Roman Catholics, 33 percent of Dutch Reformed, 55 percent of Calvinist Reformed, and 50 percent of Muslims attended church/mosque at least once every 2 weeks. Approximately 70 percent of the total population never attends services. There are no figures for Jewish participation rates.

Research reveals that those who leave a religion rarely return. Nonetheless, significant numbers of those who have left their religions still consider themselves to be members of a religious group. The beliefs and practices of many of these adherents have developed into what some describe as a selective approach to religion, accepting what they consider the positive but not the negative aspects of a particular religion.

Following the secularization that began in the 1960s, many Roman Catholics have left the Church. Among those

remaining, many express alienation from their religious hierarchy and doctrine. For example, most of the country's Catholics express no objections to female or married priests and differ with church thinking on a number of sensitive doctrinal issues.

Dutch Protestantism is quite heterogeneous. Among the Protestant churches, the Dutch Reformed Church remains the largest, although it also has suffered the greatest losses to secularization. Church membership in this denomination has declined by two-thirds in the past 50 years. The second largest Protestant group, the Calvinist Reformed Church, has been less affected by membership losses and even has succeeded in attracting former members of the Dutch Reformed Church. In 2003, the main Dutch Protestant churches merged into the United Protestant Churches; however, a few orthodox communities refused to merge.

Thanks to a long-established climate of religious tolerance, Jews numbered more than 140,000 in 1940. Amsterdam harbored one of the largest and liveliest Jewish communities in Europe. During the Second World War, 106,000 Dutch Jews were killed, the highest percentage in Western Europe. Of the remainder, approximately 5,000 remained in the country while the rest fled. In the post-war period, Jewish life slowly revived and flourished. While the Dutch have generally shied away from discussing this grim period of their history, Prime Minister Balkenende recently acknowledged publicly Dutch "collaboration, indifference and treason" during the war, and "the lack of humanity and understanding" towards Jews in the post-war period.

Research shows that the country counts approximately 45,000 Jews today, less than a quarter of whom belong to active Jewish organizations such as religious communities, hospitals, schools, cultural and welfare centers, sports and entertainment clubs. Since 1997, the Jewish community's main organizations have an umbrella group, the Central Jewish Consultation, which represents the community's interests in discussions with the Government.

The number of Muslims continues to rise, primarily because of Turkish and Moroccan immigrants marrying partners from their countries of origin. By 2004, 945,000 Muslims constituting 5.8 percent of the total population were living in the country, primarily in the larger cities, including approximately 341,000 Turks and 295,000 Moroccans. Other Muslims came from the former colony of Suriname. In the past decade, Muslim numbers further increased because of the large numbers of asylum seekers from countries such as Iran, Iraq, Somalia, and Bosnia. A network of mosques and cultural centers serves the Islamic community. This network is organized to conform to the national system of subsidies, which underwrites cultural activities geared to social orientation and the promotion of equal opportunities. The number of mosques has increased to approximately 400; more than half cater to Turks, approximately 140 to Moroccans, and approximately 50 to Surinamese. The founding of more than 30 Islamic schools further reflects the increased influence of Islam. Muslims are not separately organized politically. The Contact Body for Muslims and Government (CMO,) representing approximately 80 percent of the Muslim community, discusses the community's interests with the Government. The official Muslim community unanimously condemned the Van Gogh killing.

There are approximately 95,000 Hindus, of whom 85 percent originally came from Suriname and approximately 10 percent from India. The country also hosts smaller numbers of Hindus from Uganda, as well as similar movements based on such Hindu teachings as Ramakrishna, Hare Krishna, Sai Baba, and Osho. The Buddhist community is quite small, with approximately 17,000 members.

There are a small number of foreign missionary groups operating in the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The Government at all levels strives to protect this right in full and does not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors. The Constitution permits the Government to place restrictions on the exercise of religion only on limited grounds, such as health hazards, traffic safety, and risk of public disorder.

The Government provides state subsidies to religious organizations that maintain educational facilities. The Government provides funding for education to public as well as to religious schools, other religious educational institutions, and health care facilities, irrespective of their religious affiliation. To qualify for funding, institutions must meet strict nonreligious criteria for curriculum standards, minimum size, and health care.

Religious groups are not required to register with the Government; however, the law recognizes the existence of religious denominations and grants them certain rights and privileges, including tax exemptions. Although the law does not formally define what constitutes a "religious denomination" for these purposes, religious groups generally have not experienced any problems qualifying as a religious denomination.

The law provides for religious minorities to have their views broadcast on radio and television. For example, broadcasting time has been allotted to the Islamic Broadcasting Foundation, an alliance of all Muslim groups in the country.

The Government of Turkey exercises influence within the country's Turkish Islamic community through its religious affairs directorate, the Diyanet, which is permitted to appoint imams for the 140 Turkish mosques in the country. There is no such arrangement with the Moroccan Government. The Moroccan Government maintains connections with the approximately 100 Moroccan mosques through a federation of Moroccan friendship societies but has no mechanism to exercise direct influence in the country.

The authorities have expressed concern regarding Turkish and Moroccan interference with religious and political affairs because such interference appears to run counter to government efforts to encourage integration of Muslims into society. For example, government authorities insist on strict observance of mandatory school attendance up to the age of 16 despite appeals by foreign imams to keep girls under the age of 16 at home.

To counter undesired foreign influence, the Government has begun to provide subsidies to universities providing training for local persons interested in becoming imams to ensure that they have a basic understanding of local social norms and values. Given the strict separation between the State and religion, however, the authorities themselves cannot organize such training and must depend on private organizations. In addition, the assembled Muslim organizations decided in February 2005 to found an Islamic institute to educate imams and Islamic theologians in coordination with individual university programs. Parliament has proposed phasing out the issuance of work permits to foreign imams by 2008 to increase the number and influence of locally educated religious leaders. As an interim measure, the Government has decided that all imams and other spiritual leaders recruited in Islamic countries first must follow a yearlong integration course before they are allowed to practice in the country.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

Disputes have arisen when the exercise of the rights to freedom of religion and speech has clashed with the strictly enforced ban on discrimination. Such disputes are addressed either in the courts or by antidiscrimination boards. Complaints have repeatedly been filed against religious or political spokesmen who publicly condemn homosexuality. However, longstanding jurisprudence dictates that such statements made on religious grounds do not constitute a criminal offense absent an intention to offend or discriminate against homosexuals.

The Equal Opportunities Committee (CGB) and the courts have also repeatedly addressed the wearing of headscarves in schools and places of employment. The prevailing opinion is that the wearing of headscarves may be banned only on narrow grounds, such as security considerations or inconsistency with an official government uniform. In 2003, the CGB stated that a recent ban by Amsterdam schools on wearing burqas in class is not discriminatory. The CGB stated that open teacher-student and student-to-student interaction is more important than the right to wear a burqa.

In other areas, employers have been rebuked publicly by antidiscrimination boards for failure to allow non-Christians to take leave from work on their religious holidays, for objecting to Sikhs wearing turbans or to Muslim women wearing headscarves, or for objecting to observance of food requirements on religious grounds. The CGB ruled against a company that had denied employment to a Turkish applicant because he intended to attend Friday service at a mosque. This was considered a violation of freedom of religion. According to the CGB, Friday service for Muslims is equivalent to Sunday service for Christians. It ruled that employers are obliged to take account of reasonable religious demands from their employees, except in exceptional circumstances.

In 2003, legislation took effect that explicitly permits employees to refuse to work on Sunday for religious reasons, unless the work's nature, such as in the health sector, does not permit such an exception. The legislation came in the wake of charges by the Calvinist Reformed Social Union of religious discrimination by employers and reports of job applicants being turned down for employment for refusing to work on Sundays for religious reasons.

The Government has issued a formal exception to the entry ban against Reverend and Mrs. Sun Myung Moon, founders of the Unification Church, under the terms of the Schengen Treaty. The Government would not refuse the Moons entry to the country on religious grounds.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or

illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Religious communities have tended to live alongside each other in harmony. Among them, the Protestant denominations in particular promote the Jewish cause and reach out to the Islamic community. However, in the fall of 2001, widespread societal resentment towards growing numbers of Muslims and their culture became apparent. Populist politician Pim Fortuyn, who was killed shortly before the 2002 general elections, received broad support for his characterization of Islam as "a backward culture" that is intolerant toward women and homosexuals and that allows practices from the Middle Ages.

The November 2004 killing of Dutch filmmaker and critic of Islam Theo van Gogh by a Dutch Muslim extremist exacerbated existing social tensions. The killing triggered a brief upsurge of violent incidents, including upwards of 30 arson attacks against mosques, Muslim schools, churches, and other property. There were numerous minor incidents, including intimidations, brawls, vandalism, and graffiti with abusive texts. Expanding pockets of both radicalized Muslim and other youth, who identify themselves as "native Dutch," were responsible for many of these instances of violence. A number of offenders were arrested, prosecuted, and convicted. Polls revealed that popular attitudes towards Muslims were rapidly becoming more negative, and a majority now views their presence as a threat.

Muslims already faced continuing criticism for such perceived problems as the poor integration of Muslim immigrants into society, the high level of criminal activity among Muslim youth, and the conservative views of orthodox Muslims on topics such as women, homosexuals, and corporal punishment. Overcoming habitual reticence and abandoning Dutch libertarian attitudes toward religion, a number of outspoken politicians, mainly on the right, openly argue that Islam itself is incompatible with Dutch traditions and social values.

In response, the Government launched a comprehensive outreach campaign to counter anti-Muslim sentiments, stressing that the majority of Muslims fit comfortably into Dutch society. At the same time, the Government made clear that it would combat directly groups espousing violence in support of an extremist Islamic agenda. These efforts raised public awareness and triggered debate, but concerns remain about the effectiveness of the new measures.

The vast majority of the population is not anti-Semitic. Certain groups opposed to Israeli policies in the occupied territories, however, such as the Arab European League and the Stop the Occupation Movement, frequently use seemingly anti-Semitic language and images to express political views. Explicitly anti-Semitic sentiments also prevail among certain segments of the Muslim community and among fringe nationalist and neo-Nazi groups.

In its latest report covering the period between May 2003 and May 2004, the Center for Information and Documentation on Israel (CIDI) registered 334 anti-Semitic incidents, compared to 359 in 2002, the first decrease (7.5 percent) in anti-Semitic incidents since 2000. In addition, the number of serious incidents (physical violence, threat with violence, and defacing of cemeteries and synagogues) decreased by 40 percent. There were no serious attacks on synagogues or Jewish institutions or shops. Provisional statistics on the subsequent period confirmed this trend. A considerable number of offenders were of North African origin.

The Government has repeatedly condemned any form of anti-Semitism and has a comprehensive action plan to combat any form of discrimination. According to this plan, parents have primary responsibility for preventing anti-Semitic incidents; however, schools can also help to combat discrimination and inculcate respect and tolerance. Public debate and dialogue are other tools to achieve these goals, to which end several nongovernmental organizations have launched projects such as Een Ander Joods Geluid (An Alternative Jewish Viewpoint) to foster debate on equality, tolerance, and human dignity. Also, the Dutch Coalition for Peace has called on Jews, Palestinians, and other Muslims in the country to work together to restore peace in the Middle East.

Stricter instructions to prosecutors and the police took effect in 2003 to ensure proper attention to incidents of discrimination. Measures were also taken to deal more effectively with discrimination on the Internet. Despite these measures, critics have noted that law enforcement agencies still do not give priority to instances of discrimination. For that reason, they say, prosecutions and convictions remain rare.

The Ministry of Education has tasked schools in longstanding guidelines to teach about different religions and ideologies in conjunction with discrimination and intolerance. Explicit attention must be paid to the persecution of

Jews in World War II. The Ministry of Welfare subsidizes a special program to teach children about the Second World War and the persecution of Jews. In particular, the program is designed to raise awareness about the consequences of prejudice. The Government also seeks to promote dialogue and supports initiatives that aim to create a better understanding between Jews and Muslims. The Anne Frank Foundation published a book with "Fifty Questions on Anti-Semitism," primarily intended for teachers in dealing with Muslim students.

The labor federations have been working to include in collective bargaining agreements stipulations that permit non-Christian employees to take leave on non-Christian holy days. Such stipulations now have been included in most agreements.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. It also engages in dialogue with all major religious groups.

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](#)